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OUR TURN TO BLINK?

WASHINGTON--It is highly likely that one of these days soon, probably before Christmas, quite possibly before Thanksgiving, CIA director Richard Helms will call the White House and ask for an urgent appointment with the President. A great deal will then depend on what Helms tells President Nixon, and what President Nixon decides to do about it.

Helms, of course, is the No. 1 man in the U.S. intelligence community. The intelligence community is braced for "the other shoe to drop." The other shoe is a series of Soviet missile tests that the intelligence specialists are sure--rather mysteriously sure--will take place before the end of this year, most probably in November or early December.

These tests will tell a great deal about the real purpose of the very great Soviet investment in offensive strategic weapons. This investment is the first shoe, and it is symbolized by the missile silos--"holes," they are called in the intelligence trade--that the Russians have been constructing with extraordinary urgency throughout this year. The tests will show what kind of missiles the Russians intend to put in their holes.

PEACE AND THE HOLES

This is not, admittedly, a subject that much interests most people in the present, curious mood of this country. But it is a subject that has to interest the intelligence specialists--and the President, too. For what goes into the Russian holes may well determine whether or not it is rational to hope for what the President likes to call "a generation of peace."

The facts about the holes are as follows (and these facts are indeed facts, for the Pentagon's reconnaissance satellites bring back pictures of the holes almost as detailed as a picture of a building across the street). A total of 91 new holes has been dug so far this year. Twenty-five of these new holes are very large--larger than the holes that used to be dug for the huge, 25-megaton SS-9 missile. Sixty-six of the holes are somewhat smaller than the regular SS-9 holes but larger than the holes for the 1-megaton SS-11 missile.

These smaller holes are dug in a big circle, with ten missiles to a circle. In the middle of a half dozen or so of these circles, a very big hole, bigger than any missile silo ever built, has

been dug. None of the holes has as yet been fitted with a missile, and the experts do not expect them to be operational until about July 1972.

There are no doubt innumerable papers marked Top Secret filled with details about the Russian holes, but the essential facts are as stated above. These facts make it possible for any reasonably intelligent reader of this magazine to be his own intelligence analyst. What are the holes for?

WHAT ARE THEY FOR?

It is very unlikely that they are simply for more first-generation SS-9s and SS-11s. Otherwise, the missiles would already be in their holes. They could be for improved versions of the SS-9 and the SS-11. Or they could be for entirely new weapons.

It seems reasonable to suppose that the Russians want to do one thing to improve the SS-9, and another thing to improve the SS-11. The SS-9, or an entirely new version of the big missile, could be provided with multiple warheads, or "MIRVed." Because its warhead is so immense, the missile could be MIRVed six, or even ten times over. Given sufficient accuracy, even a relatively small number of MIRVed multi-megaton missiles could be used to destroy, in a first strike, this country's main strategic deterrent--our 1,000 land-based Minuteman missiles.

Greatly improved accuracy for the SS-11, or some new version of such a missile, would have a similar effect. The SS-11 is an "anti-city" weapon; it is only roughly accurate, since only rough accuracy is required to destroy a city with a 1-megaton warhead. But if it could be rendered accurate enough to dig a Minuteman missile out of its concrete silo, then it too would become a direct threat to our strategic deterrent.

How about the enormous new holes? The reader's guess may be as good as the specialists', for the specialists do not pretend to have the answer. These huge holes could be for hardened control centers. Or they could be for some new kind of offensive strategic missile, perhaps filled with penetration aids to blind the U.S. defense, perhaps with an enormous warhead designed to black out the defense's radar and control systems. Nobody knows.

After the expected tests, a lot more will be known, for the tests tell us al-

most as much as they tell the Russians about such factors as accuracy, range and megatonnage. Suppose the tests show (a) a MIRVed SS-9-type missile, (b) greatly improved accuracy for the SS-11-type missile; and (c) an entirely new offensive strategic missile of immense size. Even if the tests showed only one or two of these things, Richard Helms would have to ask for that urgent appointment with the President. What would the President do then?

Already, it is too late to talk about missile "parity." The Russians have 1,600 intercontinental missiles against 1,054 American missiles, and in terms of missile megatonnage, they have between five and ten times the thermonuclear capacity we have. Their anti-ballistic-missile complex is fully operational in the Moscow area and being urgently extended, whereas our ABM system will not be operational for several years.

A NEW CONFRONTATION

They are ready to produce an entirely new swept-wing attack bomber, with an undoubted "anti-U.S. attack capability," whereas our B-52s are Model T bombers, terribly vulnerable to the new SA-5 Soviet anti-aircraft. The Soviet Y-class nuclear submarine fleet of 41 boats now equals ours, and instead of halting production, the Russians have doubled their production capacity. The Soviet conventional fleet is already in several categories superior to ours.

The new Soviet missile tests could indicate at least the serious possibility that the Soviets are building up for a new eyeball-to-eyeball nuclear confrontation, like the 1962 Cuban crisis, in which it would be our turn to blink. The likely locale of the confrontation is obvious--the Middle East. It is easy to dismiss this possibility as mere Pentagon propaganda. But it is also silly.

The intelligence analysts, including the Pentagon's, have consistently underestimated the Soviet missile program. As for the President, his political future may be at stake. If he were to abandon hope for successful SALT talks and ask for very large new appropriations to regain nuclear parity with the Russians, he might well be throwing away his chance of re-election, in this country's present mood.

So what would the President do? If some of the gloomier analysts are right, what will the President do?

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